Writing an Academic Article: An Editor Writes...

By Malcolm J. Benson

As an EFL/ESL educator you decide that you want to publish your idea to describe your work, but how to go about it? This article will offer you some suggestions for getting your ideas published.

Publishing is a way for members of the academic community to share ideas and possibly contribute something to the world's store of knowledge. To publish is to engage in a dialogue with unseen and often unknown others.

The world of academic publishing is not a homogeneous world; in reality, the variety of publications is enormous. At one end are the top-class international teaching journals that may publish 10 percent of the articles they receive; at the other, there are area newsletters. There are journals restricted to special areas. And there are journals that relate more to the so-called "parent" disciplines such as linguistics.

So one general suggestion is to read enough journals until you select two or three appropriate for your work. With this short list in mind, you might consider the following sequence:

1. Maintain a steady gaze

Contextualize your problem/idea/proposal as accurately as you can.

There is a need to understand where your work stands vis-`a-vis the established ideas on the subject. Your work is almost certainly part of that detailed exploration, and it is important to be able to see it in relation to the contemporary paradigm, as well as against the historical background.

Can you outline in a few sentences the context of your work? Where does it fit in? Can you tell a nonspecialist what the work is all about? In my experience, these are salutary exercises that may lead to clearer thinking and great improvement in a proposed article.

2. Look behind

Become conversant with the literature.

There is a literature for every area. While it may be impractical to attempt to read everything, it is to your advantage to be aware of the central works and principal trends in the area, so you are not trying to reinvent the wheel. One of the criteria some editors use for judging an article is how

well it covers the existing literature; that is, how aware the writer appears to be of the contemporary language-teaching paradigm, and of the context in which the work has been done.

After doing a literature search and making sure that your original problem/idea has not been covered or has not been covered sufficiently, you are ready to proceed to the next stage.

3. See your way clear

There are a number of classic ways of doing research.

These research paradigms mostly have their origins in either the natural sciences or anthropology. The author's understanding of the methods or approaches to be used will inevitably be reflected in the quality of the article/paper. For example, if you have decided to do research that involves surveying your students or others, have you followed the logic of surveys and are you aware of their limitations? Whatever your approach, it should be internally consistent; that is, there should be a discernible and authoritative line of development, an appropriate analytical framework, and a resulting set of ideas that the reader can take away from the whole piece.

4. Keep your eyes open

There are also a number of classic ways of writing up ideas or research.

Editors tend to think both in terms of specific types of articles and of particular audiences. It is well to bear in mind this kind of editorial thinking and to work toward a format that appeals to a definite audience.

Most journals want papers that appeal to their subscribers or, in the case of an association, to their membership. So this is one of the criteria for judging an article. Most journals publish a statement outlining their particular coverage, and time spent becoming familiar with the "world" of a particular journal is time well spent.

5. Something for all to see

Get the article written.

This sounds simple, but there are a number of points to be considered. First, the major impact of any article lies in the strength of its analysis and interpretation.

Time spent in analyzing the data, looking at the implications of an idea, or checking the practicalities of a new teaching method will immediately communicate itself to editors, and subsequently to readers. So too will the idea of making difficult concepts "manageable."

Second, the paper needs clarity. Editors spend a lot of time prior to publication straightening out convoluted writing. In many journals the quality of the writing is a very important criterion in judging a manuscript.

The best articles are interesting, with facts or ideas clearly presented. There is authority in the writing, and the reader feels that there is a likelihood of learning something. More than one side of an argument is presented, and the reader has an opportunity to evaluate the ideas. Where appropriate, examples, anecdotes, and even poetry, irony, and wit can all be made part of the article. There is no prize for being dull or incomprehensible.

The third point is a vigorous conclusion. As a general rule, conclusions are the weakest parts of the papers editors receive. The conclusion wraps up the paper. A rule of thumb for the conclusion of an article is reflected in the question: "Would I quote from this if I were writing about the same subject?" If the answer is no, then I wonder whether the article will have sufficient impact.

A fourth point is to understand what it means to write in accordance with a style sheet. Almost every journal has carefully selected a particular style sheet because it suits the type of material they publish.1 The style sheet also gives uniformity and a pleasing appearance to what would otherwise look chaotic on the printed page. More importantly, it guarantees that references can be followed up. This is an epistemological function of publishing, enabling future generations to build on earlier work.

Correct use of the style sheet is another criterion used in judging an article. The most common mistakes encountered are in the areas of seriation, hyphenation, headings, citations in text, and references. It is very important that the references in the text and the references at the back of the paper match.

6. See it through

Lastly, when the article is finished and you have sent it to the appropriate journal,2 it helps to understand what happens to it at the editorial end. This usually consists of the following: (a) a letter of acknowledgment is sent; (b) the article (assuming the editor feels there is a fair possibility of its being published) is reviewed; (c) a decision is made regarding acceptance, rejection, or, more likely, a qualified acceptance contingent upon the author's willingness to rewrite or in specified ways improve the piece; and (d) an improved draft is submitted.

At this point the author is often asked to sign documents turning over the copyright to the journal or its publisher, and is usually given details about free copies and a tentative publication date. From then on the article is effectively out of the author's hands, though some journals return the proofs for correction. Where this is done, the author has a chance to see the line editing that has taken place; otherwise the author's next sight of the article is as a finished product.

It is in steps (c) and (d) that the author is faced with the most difficult part of the writing process: coping with reviewers' comments. These often cause great anguish, usually because the criticisms of the article seem so misguided, and the suggestions for rewriting it so ridiculous. As I said at the outset, to publish is to engage in a dialogue with others, and to share ideas with other members of the academic community. That process begins the day you mail your article.

My experience as an editor indicates that those writers who persist, who re-work their articles and attempt to grapple with the comments, are the ones who finally get their work published. It may take two or three drafts, but the chances of its being published increase every time. I hope that this article has encouraged some to feel that they can produce good work too.

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